Chapter Two

TRADE AND MARKET: AN OVERVIEW
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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In Assam, the tribal and non-tribal peasant communities are economically inter-dependent. Except for the two hill districts, they live in the same area close to one another, have numerous contacts and interactions and share many common definitions of situations. This has resulted due to migration of tribesmen from the neighbouring hills and mountains to the Brahmaputra Valley in historical time. Over the centuries, the tribals as yet unassimilated into the caste-based social organization and religion of the Hindu population, came to adapt themselves to the economy of the peasantry, including wet-rice cultivation with the help of plough and ever-enlarging sphere of dependence on market-centered economy. As a matter of fact, no tribal or peasant village, no matter how remotely situated from centres of mercantile trade and commerce possessed total self-sufficiency in economic life.

In addition to interactions between tribals and non-tribals living in the plains, the hill tribesmen from the neighbouring hill states and Bhutan also regularly came down to the plains and entered into economic transactions with the plains people. For example, the Bhutiyas from Bhutan; various Arunachalese tribesmen (Monpa, Sherdukpen, Apatani, section of Adi,
Mishmi, Tangsa, Nocte, Wangcho, etc.; Naga tribesmen (Aao, Angami, Sema, Konyak, etc.) of Nagaland; various Mizo tribes and Assam hill tribesmen such as the Karbi and the Dimasa, have maintained age-old economic transactions with the plains people. As a matter of fact, a string of periodic market centres and annual fairs developed during the Ahom times in the border between the hills and plains to cater to the needs of the regional populations. In these markets the hillmen had excess to the produce of the plains as well as sundry manufactured goods, e.g., iron implements, brass and bell-metal utensils, yarn and endi silk fabrics, shells, beads and silver coins for making ornaments and so forth. In return, the plains people had excess to produce of the hills in these periodic markets and fairs ranging from fruits, vegetables and spices to rock salt, amber and tufts of yak tail-hair.

Beside periodic market and annual fair-centered transaction between the hillmen and the peasantry of the plains, the Ahom kings also introduced the system of *posa* involving the turbulent tribesmen of surrounding hill areas and the plains peasantry living in the fringe of the hills. Many of these tribes were in the habit of carrying out depredations in the plain villages close to the hills. The *posa* was a system of fixed annual tribute in grains and other produce of the plains to be paid by the plain villagers to their counterparts in the hills. The system of payment of *posa* was so effective in maintaining peace and tranquility in the border areas that even the British continued with the system by way of paying annual cash tributes to recognized hill villages, clans and chiefs. In sum, the network of economic inter-dependence between different hill and plain dwelling communities was well developed and extensive even in the pre-British time. While some transactions were effected through market centres, weekly *haat-bazaar* and annual fairs, other transactions were in the nature of payment of annual tributes and exchange of gifts and commodities including ceremonial friendship. For example, the Sherdukpen of Arunachal Pradesh visit the plains in Darrang and Sonitpur District in every winter for collecting tributes in paddy from Koch and Kachari peasants, whom they regard as their subject people (Bhagabati 1972:79).

Trade and economic transactions between individuals of different communities were always carried out in an atmosphere of traditional dignities which each side tried to maintain at
any cost. Sometimes exchange of goods between people of different communities took place on reciprocal understanding of the two groups involved akin to 'silent trade'. Until recently, the Garos of Meghalaya exchanged goods with the Bodo Kacharis and the Rabhas in Goalpara District in similar manner.

Trade and commerce are age-old phenomena in north-east India. Assam, which is the gateway of the region was the main zone for such activities even in the ancient times. Mukherjee (1992:13) traced back such commercial activities from the last quarter of the 4th to the 1st Century B.C. Kautilya's *Arthasastra* was perhaps the first written document where reference of trading in this region is found. The export of silk (*patronna*), raiment (*dukula*), aloe-wood (*agaru*), sandal wood, incense-oil (a by-product of aloe-wood), etc., have been mentioned by Kautilya from a village Suvarnakudya located in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. In the Mahabharata references of these commercial products along with few others like elephant tusks, animal skin, gold, precious stones, animals and slaves are made. The horses presented to Yudhishthira by Bhagadatta, the Mlechcha king of Pragjyotisha, were supposed to be imported from Tibet. Trade relations between Tibet and Assam as well as the rest of India flourished till the recent times. In *Ghora-nidan* (written presumably between 1714 and 1741 A.D.) a staff manual on horse of the Ahom Court classified horses in Assam as *tatuk* (Bhutan) pony and *turuki* (Turkey) pony. The route through which Bhutan pony came lay in "....the Mongoldoi Subdivision which has long since been the main gate for horse import" (Bhattacharjee 1932:ii).

The reference to commercial activities in this region during the early historical period is also found in classical Sanskrit literature, e.g., Kalidasa's *Raghuvansa* where mention is made of such activities in the Kingdom of Pragjyotisha and near Lauhitya (i.e., the river Brahmaputra).

Vivid description of 'tribal mode of trading' in the Assam region is found in the *Periplus tes Erythras Thalasses*, a text of 1st century A.D., which "....refers to an uncivilized tribe carrying baskets of *malabathrum* (Indian Cassia) to a border region, getting them bound together by another tribe in shapes of balls, receiving them from the latter tribe inside the
border and perhaps bringing these back to the interior region (of India) ..... the collection of *malabathrum* leaves from trees and binding them in marketable sizes and shapes were done due to cooperation between certain tribes in the north-east and borderland...." (Mukherjee 1992:55). Mukherjee also mentions that Ptolemy confirmed this kind of transaction and described the physical features of the people engaged in such transactions as resembling the Mongoloid people having short stature and broad face. These people were mentioned as inhabitants of Kiradia situated to the east of Ganges. These people referred to as Kiradia is identified with the Kiratas by Mukherjee. The Kiratas are the early mongoloid people of Pragjyotisha, i.e., ancient Assam.

During the medieval period (middle of the 8th to the early 13th century A.D.), there were flourishing commercial activities in Assam. Imported trade materials included items such as silver, copper, bead, pearl, coral, crowri shells, silk, woollens, horse, camel, and musk. Items exported were silk, gold, aloe-wood, incence oil, camphor, sandal-wood, elephant, horse, ivory, ebony, rhinoceros horn, dried cassia leaves and slave (Mukherjee *ibid.*, pp. 54-60).

These evidences clearly indicate that the concept of external trade germinated in the minds of the early inhabitant of Assam known as Kiratas and Mlechchas even before the Christian era. External trade is possible only when there is sound internal commercial bases.

The noted historian, S. K. Bhuyan points out that in the *Padma Purana* there is reference to Chando Sodagar a merchant who operated from the southern part of present-day Kamrup District of Assam. "The old-time conception of a trader or *Bepari* is recorded in a conversation held about the year 1696 in the court of the Gauhati Barphukan" (Bhuyan 1974:49). There was trading community in Assam known as *Mudoi*. The *Mudoi* attached to the royal court of the Ahoms was called *Bar Mudoi* (big/principal trader). However, at present *Mudois* are not engaged in traditional trading occupations.

On the northern plains of the river Brahmaputra, there were eighteen defined *duars* (gateways) along the sub-Himalayan foot-hills region for the highlanders to enter the plain areas. The *duars* were located at different points stretching from present day Sonitpur District of Assam in the east to Coochbehar District of West Bengal in the west. At many of these
duars, seasonal markets or fairs flourished spontaneously. As already mentioned, there were many other periodic markets which developed in convenient places and where members of different ethnic groups from the hills and the plains exchanged not merely goods of economic value but also ideas and cultural elements.

During Ahom Rule (1228-1826 A.D.) special measures were taken to improve the infra-structure of trade and market places. The Ahom Rulers aimed at making markets secure and free so that people from adjacent territories could visit them without hinderance. The market places generated steady income for the government from duties and custom revenues. In late Ahom period some major trade centres grew in the frontiers of the kingdom to facilitate trade relations with outside regions with full royal patronage. To administer and look after the affairs connected with trade and market centres the royal court appointed wardens known as Datiyaliya Bisaya (border officials) and Duaria (gateway official) (Bhuyan ibid., p.49).

One such frontier market place Hadira Choki (also known as Assam Choki) was situated on the northern bank of Brahmaputra opposite present-day Goalpara town. Hadira Choki came to be a famous trans-border market centre particularly for trading with Bengal. During the Ahom period, Assam had trade routes called haat baat not only with Bengal and neighbouring hills, but also with Bhutan, Tibet and as far as China. Trade articles were mostly woollens, rock salt, gold dust, silver, gem stones, chinese silk, musk and tuft of yak tail-hair. An example of trans-border trade with neighbouring Bengal is found in Hamilton's 'An Account of Assam' (1987, original date of publication for the year 1820; see Appendix G).

Hamilton (1987) also mentions several other market places in the border with Meghalayan sub-montane region. These were situated close to the present field-area to which the Garos brought salt acquired from Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) through a trade route via Jayantia Hills. Another Garo dominated market place is Pamohee east of Boko in the field area.

Market-centered trade were thus part and parcels of the regional economy since early times. The people of Assam were even familiar with multinational trade well before the establishment of the French East India Company in the year 1755 A.D. at Goalpara (Bhuyan 1974:64) and later the British East India Company.
In pre-British Assam, transportation and distribution facilities to different destinations by land and riverine trade routes were fairly well-developed for transactions with Bengal, Bhutan, Burma (now Myanmar) and as far as China (Bhuyan 1974, Gait 1981, Hamilton 1987, Mukerjee 1992, White 1988). The neighbouring hills were connected by numerous jungle paths which also served as trans-national routes. Through these jungle routes Assam received several important trade articles from the hill dwellers. For instance the Singhphos imported amber (for making ear ornament) from Ava (in Myanmar) which found its way to Assam. Other articles imported from the hills through the jungle routes were copper through the Abor Duar (in the border between Arunachal and Assam); scents from Mismi Hills; iron and cotton from Garo Hills; lukibilla (a type of silk fibre), norakapor (ambrioderes silk), dyed goat's hair and spear from Naga Hills; long pepper, ginger, maize and mithun (a species of semi-domesticated cattle) from the Nishi (Dafla) and Aka inhabited hills of Arunachal Pradesh (White, 1988 : 186-87).

While some trade transactions were on direct exchange mode of commodities, there is also evidence of the use of currency as medium of exchange. The gold coins unearthed in 1972 at Paglatek Hill near Goalpara town are the earliest datable coins found in the area, attributed to 635-36 A.D. In non-monetised exchange, which is practised to some extent even today, at times one kind of article or merchandise is used as standardized unit. This can be termed as 'folk-money'. After advent of the British in the 1830s 'folk-money' became somewhat ineffective. Coins and later on paper currency came to be extensively used. But in some areas of rural Assam, both folk-money and paper currency exist side by side. For example, in the annual fair known as Jon-bil bazaar held in mid January near Jagiroad, goods are bartered by the hill Lalungs (Tiwas) and their counterparts living in the plains. The hill Lalungs bring sesame, brinjal, chilli, ginger, turmeric, arum, potato, cotton and lac produced in the hills and exchange those with fish, dry fish, sandoh (rice powder) and rice cake of the plains Lalungs. In this exchange sandoh is regarded as the most valued item. After exchanging goods in the traditional manner, the Lalung purchase their other requirements from the visiting non-tribal traders at the fair.
ADMINISTRATIVE BACKGROUND

After annexation of Assam by the British in 1826, the new rulers gradually changed the administrative policies. For instance, in 1835 the custom house operated by Duaria Barua at Hadira Chowki was abolished and transit dues were abolished (Gait 1981:301). New bazaar regulations were framed and tax was levied on goods sold in the market (White 1988:201-11). For collection of land revenue the British appointed local agents, who are also land lords particularly in Goalpara District divided into 19 large estates. On the other hand, in Kamrup District, revenue areas called mouzas, were managed by mouzadars appointed by the British (Venkata Rao 1970:57-58). It is obvious that the rural markets were managed by the land lords in Goalpara and mouzadars in Kamrup District. The management of fairs held in the border region between hills and plains were brought under the 'Local Rates Regulation of 1879' in 1882 under a District Committee of which the Deputy Commissioner was the chairman.

Market places in the towns were controlled by respective Municipal Board under the provisions of the Municipal Act of 1864 as amended upto 1923. Likewise, in the rural areas the respective Local Board, first constituted in 1915 were authorized to levy tax on stalls at shopping centres and market places.

Following Independence, the 'Assam Rural Panchayat Act, 1948' came into force. Under its provisions, in the 1950s the two-tier system of Primary and Rural Panchayat had powers to administer small rural markets. This transfer of control over rural markets coincided with the abolition of zamindari (landlord) system under the provisions of Assam State Acquisition of Zamindaries Act, 1951. Under the 'Assam Rural Panchayat Act, 1948' there were provisions for two-tiers of Panchayats. A population ranging from 20 to 25 thousand people with the area of a revenue mouza covered by a Rural Panchayat.

The Assam Panchayat Raj Act of 1959 superseded the earlier Assam Rural Panchayat Act of 1948. This new act provided for a three-tier panchayat system with Gaon Panchayat at the village level, Mohkuma Parishad at the sub-divisional level and an intermediary Anchalik
Panchayat. In this system, the Anchalik Panchayat was directly responsible for matters relating to the rural haats and bazaars. Under approved bye-laws, the various Anchalik Panchayats could levy taxes and tolls on all scheduled markets located within their respective jurisdictions.

In 1973, the three-tier Panchayat Raj system was replaced by a two-tier system through the 'Assam Panchayat Raj Act of 1972'. The intermediate Anchalik Panchayat was abolished. In this system, the Mohkuma Parishad could lease out the markets for one year by inviting tenders from prospective lessee. However, following further amendment of Panchayat Raj Act (in 1986), the Anchalik Panchayat (in a revised three-tier system) have taken over the control of rural markets since July, 1992. The Anchalik Panchayat leases out the markets to successful bidders for one Panchayat Financial year (July to June). There are clear-cut regulations and bye-laws on leasing out the markets. Sealed tenders are invited affixing court fee stamp and depositing earnest money for consideration of the bid. Clause 58(2) of the Panchayat Raj Financial Rules of 1990 mentions that "....such tenders should be floated at least forty five days before the last day of the Panchayat Financial year". The 'Form of lease for Markets' mentions that a lessee shall be responsible for the market place. Provisions of pure source of water supply, maintenance of drains and cleanliness of the market site and provide latrines and urinals. The lessee is also supposed to ensure stoppage of putrid fish, flesh, fruit, vegetables and other articles of food and drink not fit for human consumption. In the event of violation of any of the given conditions, a lease can be terminated.